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MODERN SPAIN AND THE SEPHARDIM: LEGITIMIZING IDENTITIES

Maite Ojeda-Mata, Lexington Books, 2017 (Lexington Studies in Modern Jewish History, Historiography and Memory). Translated by Pamela Lalonde, 259 pp.,

That Ferdinand and Isabel's dream of making Spain *Judenrein* in 1492 never fully succeeded is well known. Much less familiar, however, is the story of how after centuries of legal prohibition, the Iberian Peninsula once again became the home of Jews, both as individuals and as members of organized communities. In this revised version of a dissertation originally defended at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in 2009, and then published in part as a book in 2012, Maite Ojeda-Mata explores in close detail the trajectory by which a Jewish presence was reestablished in Spain and some of its overseas territories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hers is a compelling and far from predictable story, involving many twists and turns, and more than one surprise.

The point of departure of *Modern Spain and the Sephardim* is the evolving status and perception of Jews and Judaism during the convulsive late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Attitudes and policies toward the possible readmission of Jews wound up being marked by the twin realities of the political polarization between liberals and conservatives and the broader, pan-European racialization of antisemitism that, ironically, had deeper historical roots in the Iberian peninsula than in any other part of the continent. Stated roughly, liberals in Spain and elsewhere favored assimilation of the Jews, whereas conservatives either doubted its feasibility or rejected its desirability. At play here were notions of spiritual as well as racial purity, and the ensuing ideological conflict led to some intriguing variants, not the least of which was a liberal reading of racial mixture as one of the more positive features of Spain's past.

Following this chronologically broad mise-en-scène, the author shifts her attention to North Africa as the locus in which the reinsertion of Jews into Spanish society began. Military and other authorities engaged in expanding Spain's presence in Morocco in particular-— partly as compensation for the radical reduction and restructuring of Spain's empire in the Western hemisphere— slowly began to recognize the utility for their aims of Sephardim who still spoke the Spanish language, and who could be called upon to serve as economic and cultural brokers with the local population.

Growing familiarity breeded less contempt than cooperation, and the different forms of engagement of the Sephardim in the Spanish colonial project served as the basis for ever more solid forms of identification. Both sides— the local Jewish communities and metropolitan officials, civilian as well as military— recognized the advantages in closer political and economic cooperation. This convergence of interests soon gave rise to similar developments in the cultural and personal spheres, and led to the emergence of what the author terms «philo-Sephardism», which eventually found broader articulation in the writings of notable reformist intellectuals such as Joaquín Costa and Angel Pulido.

The resurgence of a Jewish presence in peninsular Spain itself— the subject of chapter three— proved to be slow and difficult. Long before it became a policy, the readmission of Jews was a process— one full of improvisations, and in which both political decisions and legislation found themselves catching up with local realities. While this immigration mostly featured *sephardim*, it also included a few *askenazim*, among them (for example) the representatives of the Rothschild and other European banks beginning in the 1830s. Clearly the most exotic immigrants in this slowly growing trickle were several hundred Spanish-speaking Jews from Istanbul and Salonika, most of whom settled in the vicinity of the Sant Antoni marketplace in the southern zone of Barcelona. Ojeda-Mata deals with them by moving her analysis in an ethnographic direction, and provides a long-term glimpse of the arrival and eventual disappearance of this largely working-class community based on interviews and other more personalized approaches to research. She concludes the chapter with the observation that for various reasons the Jewish communities in metropolitan Spain were more concealed than their proudly visible counterparts in North Africa, such as Tangier or Melilla.

Ojeda-Mata shifts gears in the fourth chapter, and turns toward what she refers to as the «geopolitics of identity». This focuses above all on the legal dimensions of the expanding Jewish presence in Spain, and devotes special attention to marriage practices, family law, and governance within the semi-recognized Jewish communities. Above all she lingers on the conflicting notions of and policies regarding citizenship, all of which reveals the generally improving yet still precarious nature of the presence of Jews in Spain. The next two chapters fit closely together as a detailed and evenhanded reconstruction of the experience of Spain's Jews during the Civil War and the Second World War. It goes without saying that public statements of anti-semitism increased dramatically under a dictatorship that Hitler helped to bring to power. Still, the author concludes that Franco's pronouncements in favor of German ideology and interests was more tactical than anything else, and had less of an impact on Spain's Jews than one might expect. This policy of subtly marking a certain distance from Nazism paid off well in the long run, and was one of the cards Franco wound up playing in his eventually successful campaign to be accepted as an ally by most of the Western powers during the Cold War.

The book closes with an Epilogue and a Conclusion that brings the study of Spain's Jewish population up to the present. Both these sections highlight the crucial long-term interplay between acceptance and rejection in the modern history of Spain's Jews, as well as the extent to which this admittedly unique mixture of inclusion and exclusion was

closely overseen by the political and cultural elites that have dominated modern Spanish history. It concludes by remarking that the marginal role of the sort of intense antisemitism that the Nazis promoted owed much to the belief by Spanish liberals that the Spanish nation was the product of long-term racial and spiritual mixture, and to the Catholic right's belief in the redemptive power of conversion. An unusual combination, to be sure, but one whose mitigating effects marked a crucial difference. It also ties in well with the author's broader argument that the growing if begrudging acceptance of Jews as Spaniards constituted one part of a more general process in which a notion of shared language and culture slowly joined and eventually replaced religion as core elements in the articulation of a Spanish national identity.

On balance, *Modern Spain and the Sephardim* provides clear and thoughtful analysis of a significant aspect of nineteenth and twentieth-century Spanish history, what the author refers to as the «fluid intersection between nationalism, anti-Semitism, and philo-Sephardism in modern Spain» [177]. It is also an unusually well-documented study, based on prodigious research in a wide range of archival and other sources. In short, this book constitutes an excellent exercise in historical research and interpretation enriched by close familiarity with the relevant social science. It is a timely one as well, in that many developments in present-day Spain, such as the mixed reception of non-Christians from North Africa, can be better understood thanks to Ojeda-Mata's impressive reconstruction of a truly unusual instance of the «recovery» of a minority of no little relevance, both real and symbolic.

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